Be Like the Earth

The Practice of Forbearance

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Good morning, dear friends.

Today is the twenty-third of July, 1996, and we are in the Upper Hamlet.

Two days ago in a Dharma talk in English, I asked the children to name that room in our modern home where we can have peace, where we can practice peace, where we can restore our peace. About fourteen years ago I called it a "breathing room," but there must be better names for that room. Of course in that room we can practice breathing and restoring ourselves. But I guess that the children can help propose a beautiful name for that room. Those who are new arrivals should be told a little bit about that.

We said that in our home there is a room for everything—like a guest room, a room for eating, a room for playing, a room for sitting and watching television—but we need a room where we can be really at peace. No one can shout at us when we go into that room. When the atmosphere in the family is not light, is difficult to bear, we can always have some place to go to be ourselves. No one can pursue us into that room in order to continue asking questions, or saying things that we don't want to listen to. We may call it the "Embassy of the Buddha," where you can seek asylum. We can call it the "territory of peace," the "Pure Land," the "meditation corner." Please come up with some better name that fits.

When we look at the village, we see there is a church or a temple in the village. That church or temple plays the role of spiritual leadership. It used to be a higher building than the other houses, and it was surrounded with trees and so on. And we used to think of it with love, with peace, because we knew that when we went there, we could be rid of the annoying things of everyday life. But somehow the church or the temple has lost the role of leadership. Many of us don't feel comfortable anymore when we think of the church or of the temple. Whose fault is that? We should not blame anyone in particular. We are co-responsible for that. A church not playing well the role of a church, a temple not playing well the role of a temple that is our responsibility. We have to restore the spiritual leadership of a church, of the temple. But do we have the right and the power to do so? We are not the church people. We are not the temple people. Can we decide how to rearrange the church and the temple so that it will fit our spiritual need? Because in our daily life we need peace, we need harmony, we need quiet, we need communion—but they no longer provide us with that. Of course, we may have the right to speak out, that we need this and that.

But in our home of the twenty-first century—we still have four years to prepare for our modern home. At least we have that room in our home to play the role of leadership. We talked about the furniture in that room, we talked about a few cushions, we talked about a little table with a little flower pot, we talked about a little bell so that we can practice breathing and calming ourselves. To me, a civilized home should have such a room. It is the heart of our home. Everyone in the family has to sign an agreement, a treaty, that the space of the room should not be violated by anyone, including the father, the mother. Once you enter the room there is no right to shout, there is no

right to have rough words or gestures, because that is the territory of mindfulness, that is the territory of peace, and everyone has to show his or her reverence, respect. Because if we lose that respect and reverence, then there is nothing left. So please help find a name that fits that room. It will play the role of the church and the temple in our home. We will learn how to maintain that room, how to arrange that room, how to practice in that room, so that peace and harmony in our new home become something real—for the sake of all of us. The children already have discussed this, and I ask you to continue it today.

We also discussed the green space so that many houses in the area can profit—a kind of garden, a kind of Buddha garden. You might like to call it a Sangha garden. Because the central park is too big—the central park is for the whole city. We are talking about a little park, for a group of houses only. Because if each house has got to have a room that represents the territory of peace, then the hamlet—a group of houses, like fifteen, twenty, or thirty houses—should possess a space, green, natural, where the harmony of nature should be respected. I propose that in that mini-park there is a playground for children, a space where children can jump and run. Because we do need it, and it is a pleasure for people like me to sit and watch the children running and shouting and playing. We need that very much.

And then there should be a path for walking meditation. Every home needs to have such a path. When you are engaged on the path of walking meditation, you have the right to walk slowly, and in silence. A group of houses should make a kind of agreement on how to maintain and use that little communal park. I cannot survive without the path of walking meditation, I am so used to it. It’s like food. If I have no time, no chance, no place to practice walking every day, I don’t feel completely happy. I can be happy, but my happiness is not perfect. The walking has become part of my daily life. Every time I have five or ten minutes, I like to use it for walking meditation. Each step brings me a lot of joy. During the walk I pay attention to nature, to every creature that is there—a butterfly, a snail, a little flower, a dry ripe leaf. I don’t want to call it a dead leaf. I like to call it a "ripe" leaf.

And I like to see mother taking the hand of daughter, practicing walking meditation, teaching daughter to breathe in and out, to calm her emotions. I would like to see father taking the hand of son, walking meditation. I would like to see them sitting on the grass together, practicing looking at the blue sky, smiling. We don’t need to be riding in a motorcar very quickly in order to enjoy life. We can just sit. I guess riding in a motor car is fine, but you might disturb people if the sound of the motor car is too big. And you risk polluting the air and you may reduce the happiness of other people, because you make the quality of the air poorer. So we have to be mindful. In that space of nature, of harmony, we should delegate members of the community who know how to maintain the harmony and the beauty of the little park, for the pleasure of everyone. We should make our walking meditation path beautiful, available to everyone. I hope there are several paths for walking meditation because I do wish that every house, every family, will at least have the opportunity to practice walking meditation every day.

After having worked for one hour, one hour and a half—whether manual work or intellectual work—I always like and need walking meditation outdoors. Yesterday, I had one article to edit. I like editing an article—I like words, I like grammar, I like ideas, I like images, I like poetry—yes. But after about one hour of being together with a pencil (I still don’t use a computer yet) and the sheet of paper, I looked up through the window and I saw that young palm tree, so beautiful it looks like it just came out fresh from paradise. It’s so appealing that I said, "Although I like editing, the nature outside is so inviting." So my heart vibrated with happiness—I saw that the Pure Land, that paradise, is available. I was like a child. I wanted to come and touch the palm tree.

I have to tell you a little bit of the story of that palm tree: I was in Germany and practicing cleaning my intestines together with other friends. I was fasting several days, just drinking herb tea. One night I saw myself practicing walking in a beautiful park. I was made very mindful during the dream. I touched the bark of the trees mindfully, and enjoyed every detail of the bark of the trees. At one point, I was walking along a path where the vegetation is very green, very young palm trees of this height on my left, and I stopped, and I looked, and I said, "This green is so beautiful, so deep," and I was using my finger and touching it, mindfully. You know something? Mindfulness is possible in dreams. If you practice mindfulness, if you continue, there will be a time when you also practice mindfulness in dreams. And you enjoy it.

I remember a Zen master in China one day brought a number of visitors to visit the garden of the temple and he pointed to a bush, and he told his visitors, "Ladies and gentlemen: people of our time, when they look at these leaves and flowers, they look at them as if they are in a dream." When I practice walking meditation, especially in the woods, I practice touching and looking at the vegetation in such a way that these things cannot be in a dream, should not, could not, be in a dream. And I have succeeded. That even in a dream, the bark of the tree, the palm

tree, have become real also. So when I woke up I said, "The young palm tree in my dream is so beautiful." I told myself that when I go back to France I would like to plant a palm tree, plant it in my garden. Three days after I return to France, I went to the nursery and I found a very beautiful young palm tree, so I asked her to come to my garden.

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I planted it in a place where I can see it a lot of times during the day. Every time I stop my work of editing, I look out and I see it. It is part of my Sangha, reminding me to be happy, to enjoy every moment of my daily life. So in that park, in that little park that belongs to the Sangha of new homes—about twenty or thirty homes—we should have a palm tree like that, or any kind of tree that you like to treat the way I treat my palm tree. You should rely on friends in the neighborhood who know how to talk to trees, how to take good care of trees, how to make trees into friends, members of our Sangha, how to arrange a beautiful walking meditation path. And there should be a place where we can sit down—just sit down. We don’t need to talk or anything. If you know how to sit down, you’ll be happy enough. The other day I talked about Nelson Mandela a week ago in the first Dharma talk of the summer opening. He was visiting France, and he was asked by a reporter what he needed the most. And he said, "The thing I need the most is to sit down. Since the time I got out of prison, I have had no time to sit down." Poor man.

We have come to Plum Village just to sit down. Don’t waste your opportunity to sit down. You know how to sit down and not to worry, not to think about doing this or that, to lay down your burdens, your worries, your projects. Just sit down and feel that you are alive—with your son, with your daughter, with your partner, with your Dharma brother or sister. That’s enough to be happy. Our sitting in the morning is just for sitting down. Our eating lunch at noon is also for sitting down. The Dharma talk is just an opportunity for us to sit down. So I am happy that the very young people can follow this Dharma talk, because it is very deep.

It is also my desire that in that little communal park, there is also something like a temple or a church, but you don’t need to spend a lot of money building it. It must be a place where you can go in and feel protected by the atmosphere and environment. In fact, it is like the breathing room in your home. But now it is not for your family only, it is for twenty or thirty families living in the same area. And because it belongs to different spiritual traditions, that temple, that church, or that meditation hall should not bear any symbol.

There are friends in Florence, in Italy, who propose that they build a temple of peace on a hill of the city. There will be a place without any symbols and people of different spiritual traditions can come and sit together. No liturgy, no chanting, nothing, no statue. But beneath, there may be several halls in where different spiritual traditions can place their symbols—a Buddhist meditation hall, a Catholic praying place, and so on. That is a good idea. But I think in order to build a temple you need a lot of money and I’m not thinking of that. I’m thinking of a beautiful, quiet, simple place where families can come in and sit with other families and offer each other peace, quiet.

Talking about our home in the twenty-first century, we have to be aware of our real need and have to speak out about what we need. We have to talk to our architects, to our government, to our city council for what we need. Imagine a neighborhood where children have no place to go, where people only go to liquor shops and when they go back home, get drunk and shout at each other. There’s no communication between families. The black people in that house have no relationship with the white people who live next door. When they meet each other, they don’t say hello, there is no relationship at all. The children feel there’s no space, no communication. Many children are delinquent, people are not happy with each other in the family and they are not happy with neighbors and you don’t feel safe living in such an area. So all these things should be discussed among us who live in the area and we have to rearrange our way of life, as families and as communities.

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You may like to discuss this in order to bring our collective insight to organizing our homes in the twenty-first century. During the past week the children have been given teachings on how to breathe, how to practice sitting meditation, practice pebble meditation, and walking meditation.

Another practice we have learned is the practice of calling the names of some people we love. We select, say, five people that we love very much. We know that every time we call his or her name we feel happy, we feel the freshness, we feel the love. That practice is called "mindfulness of calling." For instance you love David. David is

very close to you. You know about David. You know about his quality. You remember his smile. You remember his nice words. You remember his tenderness. So in the sitting position, while you breathe in, you call his name, "David." Mindful calling. You don’t have to call it out loud. Just call him in your spirit, "David." Call his name in such a way that he becomes very real to you in that moment. Even if he’s not there, if he’s in North America, in Japan, yet he becomes very real to you in that moment, just one in-breath. Your success depends on how concentrated you are, how much you are interested in David’s presence. That is why I ask you to select first the person you love the most. She may be your mommy, or your brother, or your best friend. And then when you breathe out you smile and you say, "Here I am." So in-breath is for calling him or her—to make him or her be real in the present moment. And during your out-breath you smile to him and you say, "Here I am." You bring yourself back entirely into the present moment—you and he, you and she, are real in the moment. That is the practice of mindfulness of calling.

There are those of us who want to call the Buddha—mindfulness of the calling of the Buddha. Maybe it is a little more difficult to call the Buddha if you are not very familiar with the Buddha. There are ways of practice so that we can see the Buddha in a very real way, as a person. Remember, Buddha is not a god. Buddha is just a human person like us. Every time I call the name of the Buddha, I really touch him, I really see him as someone very close to me. It’s like when I call your name. The Buddha appears to me, very real, like yourself, like myself. It’s like when I call the name of the full moon. When I look up at the full moon, I know that the full moon is there. And I want only to focus my attention, my whole attention, on the presence of the full moon. So I take an in-breath and I say, "full moon." And then full moon suddenly reveals herself to me very clearly. There’s only the full moon at that moment. And when I breathe out, I smile and say, "Thank you for being there." So I and the full moon were very real in that moment. And I repeat, I do it two, three, four times, and my happiness increases all the time. I feel very alive in that moment.

So in your sitting meditation a time may be used just to call a few names in mindfulness. No matter who the person is—the person whose name you call, no matter who he or she is—mindfulness is always mindfulness. You might think that when you call the Buddha your mindfulness is more mindful. That’s not true. Even if you call the full moon, mindfulness is true mindfulness. And mindfulness—guess what it is? Mindfulness is the Buddha. You don’t need to call the Buddha in order for mindfulness to be the Buddha. Even if you call the snail or the dandelion or the full moon, your mindfulness is still the Buddha. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha. So call your mother’s name, and the Buddha is there with your mother at the same time. I said mother is a kind of Buddha and Buddha is a kind of mother. Buddha is a kind of moon and moon is a kind of Buddha. It’s wonderful! And there is the name of someone that you should try to call sometime later. That person needs you very much and you have very often forgotten her, forgotten him. And that person is yourself. Call your name and smile to him, smile to her. It’s very important. You have neglected him, you have been neglecting him a lot. He has suffered quite a lot. You have neglected her very much. She has been suffering, she needs your attention, your mindfulness, your embracing her with mindfulness. You’ve got to call her name, with compassion, with love.

You are welcome to stand up and to bow to the Sangha before you go out, but today I’m going to tell a very beautiful story in the Dharma talk. If you are interested, you might like to come back.

[Children leave Dharma hall]

Rahula is the son of the Buddha. A few years after enlightenment, the Buddha went back to his hometown, Kapilavastu, and visited his family. He was received by the king, his father, Shuddhodana. He came back with many of his disciples—monks (at that time there were no nuns yet). He gave a beautiful Dharma talk to his father in the palace. The Dharma talk was attended by several informed people in the government, in the royal families, including his former friends. Siddhartha had a lot of friends before he left home and became a monk. Rahula was eight and Rahula was missing his father. That is why when the Buddha went back to his quarters in the vicinity of Kapilavastu with his monks, Rahula wanted to accompany him. Rahula loved the presence, the company of the Buddha, and he didn’t want to go home. He wanted to stay in a monastery. One day he said, "Buddha, I want to live with you, I don’t want to go home." Buddha said, "Okay." He told his disciple Shariputra to ordain Rahula as a novice. The grandpa was very angry because his son had become a monk, and now his grandson also was made a novice. But little Rahula was so happy living close to the Buddha and he practiced very well with the community of monks. When Rahula was eighteen, the Buddha gave him a very beautiful Dharma talk. I would like to share with you that Dharma talk today. The venerable Shariputra was there, standing behind the Buddha, and he listened to the Dharma talk and he received it very deeply, and he practiced it very deeply, even though the Dharma talk was given to a very young monk—Rahula.

In that Dharma talk, the Buddha advised Rahula to practice being the earth, the great earth. The Buddha said, "Rahula, practice so that you'll be like the earth." People might throw on the earth things like perfume, excrement, urine, all the dirty things, but the earth always receives all of that without anger. No matter whether it is the perfume or jewels or gold or silver or flowers or garbage or dirt or excrement or urine, the earth receives all of that without any resentment, any anger, because the earth is great, is large. The earth has the power to transform all these. You have a dead mouse in your kitchen. You want to get rid of it—where do you put it? You throw it to the earth. In no time at all, the earth transforms the dead mouse into something that you can accept. The earth has a great power of transformation, because the earth is great. So practice so that your heart becomes as great as the earth. You suffer only if you are small, if your heart is small. But when your heart is expanded you don't have to suffer. You don't need to make an effort to bear the suffering.

The other day I started with the image of a water container. It can contain something like fifty liters and if you throw something dirty into that container then you cannot drink that water any more—you have to throw the whole thing away. But if you throw that dirt on a big river, the river is immense, and the river water is still drinkable. In no time at all, the river with all the water and the mud transforms the dirt you throw into it, and everything will be perfect again. And the whole city continues to drink the water from the river. It's not that the river has to bear. We're talking about forbearance, endurance—as a boat to carry you to the other shore—*shanti-paramita*, "crossing to the other shore," the shore of happiness, joy, and liberation by the boat of forbearance.

If you make your heart as large as the earth then you can accept anything people do to you and say to you, without suffering. But if your heart is small, you suffer a lot. So Rahula practiced to be like the earth. That is the practice of love called the Four Immeasurable Minds. Because with the practice, your heart is growing and growing and growing, larger and larger all the time. And your heart will embrace everything, everyone—no enemy at all, there's no enemy. Every time we praise the Buddha, we say, "Dear Buddha, your heart is so big and you embrace every living being with your heart, your compassion encircles the whole of the cosmos." Whether you call them friend or enemy, it's the same when your heart is big, you embrace them all, you love them all—whether they are cruel or less cruel, they are equally the object of your compassion.

So if you are a student of the Buddha try to practice so that your heart grows larger every day, and you won't have to suffer. Even if they say very mean and very cruel things to you, if they do cruel things to you, even if they try to suppress you and to kill you. How can you kill a river? How can you kill the earth? It is so huge. Some dirt cannot destroy the river because the river is so big. "Rahula, practice so that you will be like the water. Whether people throw into the water flowers, fragrance, food, milk, or urine or excrement or dead bodies of animals, the water will receive all without rancor, without resentment, without hatred; because the water has the capacity of washing everything. You can wash the bowl of the Buddha with the water, but you can wash also the dirty cloth, someone full of blood, the water receives everything and the water can wash everything, transform everything. So Rahula, please practice so that your heart will become something like water, you can receive everything without resentment and rancor.

"Rahula, practice like fire. Whether you throw into fire cloth or paper or flowers or dirty things, the fire accepts all and burns all. Whether it is fragrant or whether it stinks the fire accepts all and the fire reduces everything to ash and smoke. Because fire has the power to transform. Rahula, practice being like air. Whether you throw into the air something fragrant or something smelling bad, whether you burn incense or whether you burn rubber, the air accepts all because the air has the power to transform, because air is huge." The Buddha was instructing the young monk Rahula. But Shariputra, the tutor of Rahula, was standing there and absorbing every word of the Buddha and he was practicing that teaching for many, many years.

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With the practice of mindful breathing, with the practice of looking deeply, you develop the four elements of your heart. And these four elements of your heart will expand your heart to infinity so that your heart will be like the heart of the Buddha, capable of embracing the whole cosmos. The four elements are *maitri*, which is loving kindness; *karuna*, which in English means "compassion," *Mudita*, which means "joy"— your practice should be joyful, otherwise it's not true practice; and finally, *upeksha*, equanimity—upeksha means "no discrimination." You love because the other person needs you, not because he is your countryman or he belongs to the same religion you do. No discrimination at all that is true love.

One day, after finishing his rains retreat, the venerable Shariputra wanted to go north to visit another community

that he had to care for. After he was gone, another monk went to the Buddha and complained about Shariputra: "My Lord, Shariputra is unbearable. He is too arrogant. I hate him. You trust him you love him so much. But he is not worth your love and your trust. He plays too important a role in the Sangha. He teaches so many young monks and he has so much influence in the Sangha and that is not good for you, Lord, and not for him either. You know, my Lord, this morning when he was going out with his bowl I asked him, ‘Shariputra, where are you going?’ He didn’t say anything. He did not even answer me. And with his left hand he pushed me and I fell to the ground, and he did not apologize, he just went out."

You know, Shariputra was the object of a lot of jealousy. Because he was so important a teacher, he was loved and appreciated by the Buddha. Shariputra is there, today, object of jealousy, object of anger, of hatred. I guess in his daily life Shariputra received a lot of things like that but fortunately he practices. The Buddha said, "When did Shariputra leave?" Ánanda said, "Just this morning, my Lord. A few hours ago." "Could anyone go after him and ask him to come back, we would like to see him?" Then a novice was sent by Ánanda to go after Shariputra and to invite him back.

That afternoon Shariputra was back again at the Jeta monastery and the Buddha asked Ánanda to convene a meeting of the Sangha. You can see Ánanda holding a bunch of keys and going to each door and knocking, "Brothers, brother, come to tonight, there will be an important meeting." Then when everyone was there, the Buddha opened his mouth and spoke: "Bhikshu Shariputra, a brother of yours said this morning that when you were leaving the gate of the monastery he asked you where you were going, but you didn’t care to answer him and then you pushed him, he fell to the floor, and you just continued your way without apologizing. Is that true?"

This is the answer offered by Shariputra. The answers of Shariputra have been recorded and became a sutra, and the sutra we call *The Lions Roar of Shariputra*. I will read to you a few lines. "Lord, you remember the lesson you gave fourteen years ago to the young Bhikshu Rahula, he was only eighteen years old at the time. You taught him to contemplate the nature of earth, water, fire, and air in order to nourish and develop the four virtues of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Although your teaching was directed at Rahula, I learned from it also. I had made efforts to observe that teaching throughout the past fourteen years, and I have often thanked you in my heart.

"Lord, I have tried to practice to be more like earth. Earth is wide and open and has the capacity to receive and transform. Whether people toss pure and fragrant substances such as flowers, perfume, or fresh milk upon the earth, or toss unclean and foul-smelling substances such as excrement, urine, blood, mucous, and spit, on it, the earth receives it all equally with neither grasping nor aversion. Lord, I have contemplated to make my mind and body more like the earth. A monk who does not contemplate the body in the body, who is not mindful of the actions of the body, such a monk could knock down a brother monk and leave him without apologizing. Such is not my way.

"Lord, I have practiced to be more like water. Whether someone pours fragrant substances or defiled substances into water, the water receives them both without grasping or aversion. Water is immense and flowing and has the capacity to transform and to purify. Respected Buddha, I have contemplated to make my body and mind more like water. A monk who does not contemplate the body in the body, who is not mindful of the actions of the body, such a monk could knock down a brother monk and leave him without apologizing. Such is not my way.

"Lord, I have practiced to be more like fire. Fire burns all things, the beautiful as well as the impure, without grasping or aversion. Fire has the ability to burn, purify, and transform. My Lord, I have contemplated to make my body and mind more like fire. A monk who does not practice mindfulness of the body in the body, mindfulness of the actions of the body, such a monk could knock down a brother monk and leave him without apologizing. I am not such a monk.

"Lord, I have practiced to be more like air. The air carries all manner of smells, good and bad, without grasping or aversion. Air has the capacity to transform, purify, and release. Lord, I have contemplated to make my body and mind become more like air. A monk who does not practice mindfulness of the body in the body, who is not mindful of the actions of his body, such a monk could knock down a brother monk and leave him without apologizing. Such is not my way.

"Lord, like a small, Untouchable child, with tattered, torn cloth who clasps a bowl and begs in the street for scraps of food, I practice to hold no false pride or arrogance. I have tried to make my heart like the heart of an Untouchable child’s heart. I have tried to practice humility, not daring to place myself higher than others. My Lord,

a monk who does not contemplate the body in the body, who is not mindful of his actions and his speech, such a monk could knock down a fellow monk and leave him without apologizing. I am not a monk like that."

The venerable Shariputra continued speaking like that, but his accuser could bear it no longer. The other monk stood up and took away a piece of his sanghati robe to show his shoulder and bowed to the Buddha and joined his palms and he confessed, "Lord Buddha, I have violated the Precepts. I have born false witness against Shariputra. I confess that I had jealousy, anger, hatred in me. I confess my transgression before you and the entire community. I vow to observe my Precepts better in the future." The Buddha said, "It's good that you have confessed your transgression before the community. We are very glad you have done that." Then Shariputra rose also and he touched the ground in front of the other monk. "I bear no hatred, no anger against my brother and I ask him to forgive anything I may have done to upset him in the past." And both of them practiced Beginning Anew in front of the Buddha. The community saw that Shariputra did really practice in order for his heart to expand like the earth, like the water, like the fire, like the air. No matter what people told him, how mean it was, no matter how cruel were all the things they did to him, he could accept all of that without rancor, without suffering. That is the practice of true love in Buddhism.

True love consisting of loving kindness—the desire to offer happiness; of compassion—the desire to remove the pain from the other person; the desire to practice *Mudita*—joy, to bring joy to people around; and *upeksha*—the desire to accept everything, not to discriminate. You love just because living beings need your love, not because he is your brother or sister, he belongs to your family, or your nation—no discrimination, that is upeksha.

[Bell]

If you still suffer, if you still believe that you are the victim of injustice, if you still think that they have wronged you, it means your heart is still not large enough, you have not become quite like air, or earth, or fire, or water. You still want to undo that injustice, to free yourself from injustice. You want the other person to be punished so that you will feel better because you have been the victim of terrible injustice. Injustice is the thing you see everywhere—a two year old child struck with cancer, a baby just born is already crippled, a couple of young people just married and have an accident that kills both. There are so many things like that happening around you. And you look at the sky and you say, "God is cruel. Where is justice? If God is love, if God is just, how could God allow these things to happen?" After having looked for justice from humankind, expecting the government, expecting the military, expecting the fellow human beings to repair the injustice done to you, and you don't succeed, then you have to look at the sky and you cry out your injustice to God.

Lao Tzu, the author of *Tao Te Ching*, said, "Sky and earth are inhuman, they treat living beings like a straw dog." Straw dog—a dog made with straw, just a toy. When you look closely at things, at people, at living beings, you see so much suffering, you see so much injustice you cannot explain, and you blame sky and earth, you blame God, you blame the Creator. You see that there are so many people who are good-hearted and who continue to suffer so much and you ask why. Yet you can see many people who are very wicked, very mean, very cruel, unjustly enjoying very special treatment of society. And you revolt against this kind of thing.

In the Buddhist circle they used to explain this kind of injustice by the teaching of cause and effect, in the context of "three times." "Three times" means the past, present, and future. And they quoted this sentence: "If you want to know what kind of goal you have pursued in the past life, just look at yourself in the present life." If in the present life you suffer, it means in the former life you have done a lot of wicked things, cruel things. So if you suffer during this life, it's because you were doing bad things in the former life. Even if in this life you are trying to do good, you still have to suffer because in a past life you have done bad things. If the other person is doing cruel things but is still enjoying his situation, his special treatment, it's because in a former time in his past life he had done good things. That is why he enjoys the fruit of his good karma right now. To know the quality of your life in the future, you just look at the action you are doing in this life. If you are doing good things and if you are not happy yet, be sure that you will be happy in the future.

That is the way they explain in the Buddhist circle, in order to appease a little bit your tendency to revolt against injustice. Injustice, you can see it—a small nation occupied by a big nation for one thousand years; a nation destroyed by another nation with napalm, with defoliants. Millions of people die during a war. Think of the former Yugoslavia—a thousand people liquidated in the name of ethnic purification. The whole world community just stood by and allowed it to continue and continue and continue and continue. You want to revolt. You feel oppressed; you feel you have been the victim of injustice. You want to repair that and you think of military means,

political means, because you think that only political means and military means can repair injustice. By trying to repair the situation you may cause a lot of injustice at the same time. *Giai oan* is a Vietnamese term, "to undo injustice." *Giai* means "to untie." Injustice is like a rope binding you tightly and you suffer, and you want to remove that rope, and you naturally think of military means, sheer violence. You want political means to repair injustice. According to the Buddhist practice, the only way to undo the injustice is to enlarge your heart. Because only compassion, only loving kindness, only understanding, can answer to ignorance, can answer violence, can answer injustice, can answer cruelty.

A child, a charming little boy, catches a butterfly, and he takes the two wings of the butterfly by four fingers and he just tears like that—and the butterfly dies. The little boy laughs with joy. The little boy does not know that by doing that, he is destroying life. One day I saw a little boy doing like that, I told him, "My dear one, do you know that the butterfly has a sister, a mother? Tonight if the butterfly does not fly home, his parents will be very upset you know that? Don't you know that you are doing a very terrible thing to a butterfly?" And the child understood. From that moment on, he no longer caught butterflies. A few days later, when it was raining, he was collecting snails on the path and putting them back in the bushes, being afraid that if we step on the snails, the snails would not be able to go back to their fathers, their mothers, in the evening. "Lord, forgive him for what he is doing, because he does not know what he is doing." People are cruel; people are doing incredible things to other people because they are just ignorant. They don't know that what they are doing makes themselves suffer, not only the others suffer. They are acting in the name of the future, of happiness—happiness of humankind, happiness of the nations.

You embrace an ideology, a superb, superb ideology, and you want all your friends, all people in your country to unite, to realize the golden world, the utopia, because you are motivated by the desire to make this world beautiful, perfect, with happiness for all people. You are ready to embrace that superb ideology for the sake of your own nation, for the sake of the world community, and you believe that this is the only way for humankind, because that ideology is the cream of human intelligence. You do it out of goodwill. You kill, you exile, you lock them into psychiatric hospitals, you liquidate them, you bury them collectively, by hundreds of people, because of your love of humanity, because of your aspiration for a better future for humanity. "Lord, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing."

Only when you practice understanding do compassion and loving kindness arise. Only when the nectar of compassion is born in your heart do you begin to stop suffering. There is no other way to undo injustice, except by the practice of deep looking in order to forgive, in order to accept. If your heart is small, it means that you have not practiced, you have not been able to see things. When you see that he, she, the other person, because of ignorance, has done that to you and your beloved one, you no longer blame.

[Bell]

Of course we have suffered, all of us. Not only the Bosnians, but also the Serbs. Not only the Palestinians, but also the Israelis. Both of us have suffered. But they continue to bear hatred, anger toward each other. They think that the only way to undo the injustice is to use political and military means, and they ask our friends to come and help us with these means—political and military forces. We don't know that the way out is love, is compassion. Love and compassion, how could they be possible if we don't open our heart, if we don't open our eyes in order to see that just because we are ignorant we are making each other suffer? Where is the world community? Are you there in order to help us to understand each other? To help us produce the nectar of compassion in our heart? Or are you there in order to support one side against the other and to egg us on to continue the fighting? The interest is not the interest of one side, one nation, one party. The interest is the interest of both, because we inter-are.

In Vietnam we say, "The father eats a lot of salt and it is the son who has to drink a lot of water." What the father does, the son has to bear. We have to inherit the fruit of the actions of our fathers. Why? Is that injustice? Because we are caught in the idea of self. My father did that, not me, why do I have to bear the retribution? But in the light of non-self, you are your father; you are the continuation of your father. If you are a young person and if you suffer, you should learn that you suffer for the sake of your father, your ancestors, and also your society. You have to learn in order to look, and when you say, "I suffer," it's okay: there should be someone who suffers for the sake of his father, for his grandfather, his countrymen. "I suffer, because I love. I suffer for all of them, because they did not know—that is why they have produced a lot of suffering. Now I suffer in order to redeem that kind of wrong doing." Suddenly you have enough courage in order to continue and to forbear the difficulties. Suddenly your heart opens and suffering is no longer unbearable for you because love is in you.

You know, what you do can make your father or your mother suffer. What you do can make your great-grandchild suffer in the future. That is why mindfulness helps us to stop causing suffering to the people we love and to ourselves. A child who at two years old gets a terrible sickness—who is responsible? You cannot say, "Dear little child, you suffer like that because in your former life you have done a terrible thing." You cannot say that. Who did the terrible thing so that the child has to suffer today? All of us—that is non-self. We belong to the same reality. There is a stream of life.

If you continue to sit there and to blame and to hate your parents, that means you have not practiced looking deeply. The better way is to sit down with your parents, to reconsider the situation, to look deeply in order to see how the suffering has come into being and how we can end the *samsara* and the vicious circle of suffering for our sake and for the sake of our children and grandchildren. Understanding opens the door of the heart. Suddenly we are able to accept each other because our heart has grown large thanks to the practice of looking deeply.